

Lake Whatcom Landscape Plan
April 18, 2001
Recreation Assessment

RECREATION IN THE PLANNING AREA

(excerpted from the Lake Whatcom Water Source Protection Plan, April 2000)

In the mid-1980s a public opinion survey was conducted for Whatcom County of 260 randomly selected city and lake residents.⁴⁶ These residents were asked to identify and rank what they considered to be beneficial uses of Lake Whatcom. Seventy-one percent of those polled in this survey identified recreational uses of Lake Whatcom an important use of this resource.

Lake Whatcom is the largest lake in Whatcom County and as such, this lake and its surrounding watershed provide ample recreational opportunities. Non-lake resident recreational use is concentrated at Bloedel-Donovan park, a 17-acre city park located in basin one with a boat ramp and public swimming area. The city compiles statistics on park usage each weekend in the summer months. In 1998 these weekend statistics showed 1,943 boat launches from May 30 to August 30. This contrasts with the reported 800 boat launches during the same time period in 1986, and would seem to indicate increasing boating activity in this area.⁴⁶ City of Bellingham statistics show that usage of the swimming area in Bloedel-Donovan park is high, with lifeguard counts of people showing 16,431 total swimmers from June 13 to September 7, 1998.

Portions of the city's Whatcom Falls Park abut the watershed to the west. The city also holds an 18.6 acre undeveloped tract on Euclid which is classified as a natural open space area. The county owns five parcels of parkland/undeveloped parkland in the Lake Whatcom watershed. Truax Park, a 3.4 acre parcel adjoins the city's open space area on Euclid. At the south end of the lake, the county holds a parcel stretching from the Brannian Creek Fish Hatchery to Park Road (79 acres). Hegg Park is a small (0.67 acre) parcel on Blue Canyon Road. Lakeshore areas are accessible to the public along the Northshore trail, which extends for 3 miles on the eastern end of basin three. Above the trail, in the Smith Creek area, the county holds a 245 acre parcel, which is currently undeveloped.

In addition to public access points, there are also many private docks, swimming areas, several boat launching areas, and camping areas on Lake Whatcom. There is one on-lake boat fueling area located in basin three. A marina at Sudden Valley provides boat moorage for 88 boats and dry storage for an additional 80. There is a seaplane airstrip with airplane chartering and two hangars. Sudden Valley Golf Course was developed in 1969 on 133 acres of lakefront property that was previously used as pastureland. Hiking, biking, all-terrain vehicle use, and other recreational uses are allowed and generally not restricted within the watershed.

RECREATIONAL USE ON STATE TRUST LANDS

Current recreational use is informal and dispersed. Hiking, hunting, mountain biking, horseback riding, mushroom and berry picking, and bird watching are typical activities. This type of informal use is compatible with state land management activities and causes little threat to public resources or trust assets. There are no developed camping facilities or formal hiking trails on DNR-managed state trust lands within the planning area.

Hiking

The 1200 mile Pacific Northwest Trail, running from the Continental Divide to the Pacific Ocean, crosses the planning area in the southernmost end (Map R-1). This trail passes through the Rocky Mountains, Selkirk Mountains, Pasayten Wilderness, North Cascades, Olympic Mountains, and Wilderness Coast. The Trail crosses 3 national parks and 7 national forests. There is an effort to acquire different access across private lands to re-route the trail within the planning area though the trail would remain in the same general area. Information about amount of trail use was not available for this assessment.

Sudden Valley has a small network of trails within boundaries of the development. The trails are generally within green belts and connect park areas. A small volunteer trail maintenance program is being formed by Sudden Valley recreation staff and has some interest. Some trails link to DNR managed roads south of Sudden Valley ownership. Residents of Sudden Valley walk on these roads. No trails (sanctioned or non-sanctioned) are known to exist on the adjacent DNR lands.

Mountain Biking

Mountain biking activity within the planning area has increased dramatically within the past several years and will likely continue to increase dramatically. Local enthusiasts have formed a club (WHIMPS) and have been very active in construction and maintenance of a trail system on Galbraith Mountain in the western part of the landscape (Map R-1). Most of the trail system is on private lands (Bloedel, Trillium) with a little use on state trust lands near the Galbraith Mountain communication site (T37N, R03E, Section 11). The capacity of this trail system has been stretched for a number of reasons:

1. Increasing interest in the sport.
2. Accessibility to a population base. The trail system on Galbraith Mountain is one of the few in the western states that is accessible "from our backdoor." Most require bikers to drive to a site before starting their ride.
3. The Galbraith site has been featured in nationally distributed publications resulting in interest from outside the local community.
4. Motorcycle use of the area has increased with some resulting conflict.

5. Mountain bike use is restricted or prohibited in other areas (Forest Service wilderness, NRCAs, national parks, state parks). Many of these restrictions are recent changes in policy.

These pressures will likely result in mountain bikers looking to expand the existing trail systems or create trail systems in other areas. While aesthetics and natural beauty are important to mountain bike enthusiasts, access is of primary concern. This is especially true in areas such as Blanchard Mountain where an effort to convert trust lands to an NRCA (mountain bikes are prohibited in NRCAs) is ongoing. Recreation planning would result in decreased conflict between user groups if objectives for recreation in the area are clear.

Access to private and public lands for mountain biking varies greatly depending on ownership and landowner objectives for their land.

Equestrian Use

Horseback riding is popular on state lands on Stewart Mountain though the trail system is unauthorized (Map R-1). Members of the Whatcom Backcountry Horse-riders Association actively use and maintain this trail system. In 2000, Whatcom County Parks constructed a horse riders trailhead facility off Y Road which is used to access trust lands north of Lake Whatcom. Equestrians utilize existing logging roads and abandoned roads as well as trails. Use of roads is year-round while trail use is generally during summer months when soils are not as saturated.

Off Road Vehicle Use

Off road vehicle (ORV) use has been discouraged because it heightens the potential for resource damage in watersheds where water quality is critical. In many cases, ORV use has resulted in damage to forest roads requiring expensive repair. The primary method of discouraging use is through personal contact with, and environmental education of, ORV operators. Access to major forest road systems is blocked by gates in cooperation with other major landowners or local governments. When necessary, enforcement action is taken to protect public resources and trust assets.